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### How does contemporary artists consolidate their success and achievements through social media platform such as Instagram? : Case study of successful co-existing relationship developed between contemporary artists Ai Weiwei and KAWS with their Instagram account

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**How does contemporary artists**  
**consolidate their success and**  
**achievements through social media**  
**platform such as Instagram?**

Case study of successful co-existing relationship developed between contemporary artists Ai Weiwei and KAWS with their Instagram account

Ruochen Yao

Word Count: 11311

# **Abstract**

In the following thesis, I would compare and contrast the two art world phenomenon: Ai Weiwei and KAWS, whom have very distinctive artistic focus and style. And how the two artists utilize their social media platform to achieve different purposes and reflect different values. In the past few years, due to internet accessibility to the art world, online and social media platforms have become an intermediary between the art world and the masses, giving everyone access to art. Being household names from the art world, both of the artists generated a large number of fans on their social media platform of Instagram. However, the two artist's content display, communication methods and viewer's feedback are completely different. For each artist, I would focus on the following three aspects: Market performance over the past decade, commercial impact through brands collaboration, and socio-political impact to analyze the root causes of different content presentations. Through the same platform: Instagram, both artists amplified their success by reaching a wider demographic and greater global social influence. Ai

Weiwei further realized his socio-political values by drawing more attention and awareness for global crisis on a grander scale through the platform whereas KAWS promoted his artwork and collectibles to collectors and consumers worldwide.



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# **Introduction**

I could not agree more on Andrew Goldstein, Editor-in-Chief of *Artnet News*

interpretation of the art market on the 2019 spring intelligence report: "It is a reflection of the larger economy and the world around us. Every geopolitical event, cultural shift, and election has a ripple effect that jostles our little sector." I have always been interested in the genre of contemporary art, not only because it does not require the viewer to have a rich artistic background to appreciate and to relate themselves with the art, but also how it's market generated so much attention and revenue in such short period of time.

According to the 2019 UBS and Art Basel art market report sales in the global art market in 2018 reached \$67.4 billion, up 6% year-on-year. This second year of positive growth brought the market to its second-highest level in 10 years, and has advanced sales values 9% over the decade from 2008 to 2018. Sales at public auction of post-war and contemporary sales accounted for half the fine art auction market's value in 2019, reaching \$7.2 billion, an increase of 16% year on year. The three largest auction markets – the US, China, and the UK – had a combined share of

88%, a rise of 4% on 2017. The US was the largest auction market, with a share of 40%, followed by China.

At no moment in history have there been so many and so many very rich artists. According to Don Thompson (2007)<sup>1</sup>, some 45,000 artists in New York and London alone are struggling to make a living; only 75 in New York have superstar status with a seven-figure income. However finding out exactly how much they are worth is tough, as the cut they are taking home from their galleries is not public, nor are details of how much the various deals they make with cross-collaboration such as luxury good companies. The data of the 75 New York superstar artists was collected by the author in 2013. With the continuous development of the economy and the healthy market conditions of the contemporary art market in recent years, there is no doubt that the list of star artists in 2019 and beyond will continue to grow. Therefore, the criteria for determining whether an artist is qualified as a celebrity has become more complex in today's society. They not only need to impress the art market with an at least 7 figure annual turnover, but also need to maintain a similar relevance and importance outside

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<sup>1</sup> Georgina Adam, *Big Bucks: the Explosion of the Art Market in the Twenty-First Century*(Burlington: Lund Humphries, 2014)

the art world. Celebrity artist are no longer active within artworld news but regularly appear in political and business discussions as well. They penetrates into other spheres such as politics to generate socio-cultural value through public art, political campaigns and media appearances. Therefore I would like to evaluate the level of success of KAWS and Ai Weiwei through the following three criteria: Market Performance, Commercial Cross-Collaboration, and socio-cultural value.

# **Chapter One: KAWS**

## **1.1 Who is KAWS and why is he important**

Brain Donnelly was born in Jersey City, New Jersey. He graduated from the School of Visual Arts in New York where he obtained a Bachelor of fine Arts in illustration. After his graduation, Brain Donnelly worked as a freelance animator for Disney and contributed in films such as 101 Dalmatians, Daria, and Doug. This work experience also laid the foundation for the artist's subsequent toys production.<sup>2</sup>

While living in Jersey City, KAWS began his career as a graffiti artist. After he moved to New York in 1996, he began focusing on subverting imagery on bus shelters, phone booth advertisements and billboards where he developed the iconic Crossed eyes. Some of the widely notorious work of the time including painting over Celebrity super model Kate Moss and Christy Turlington's Calvin Klein advertisements.<sup>3</sup> These action also evoke the artists thinking on how to address his work effectively to a broader audience through commercial advertisement by

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<sup>2</sup> "About Kaws," streetartbio, accessed November 30, 2019, <http://www.streetartbio.com/kaws>)

<sup>3</sup> Youtube (Bloomberg, June 15, 2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fPTntCQqXm4>)



deviating himself from traditional graffiti. He once mentioned in an interview that “I started to think how advertising work and how that communicates to such a broad audience and thinking of graffiti as being such a small closed off world that you the participants really understand what is going on but to the greater public, you can look at a wall and really not know where you’re looking at. And when I was working with the ads I started to think about using iconography that would operate in a broader sense. It wasn’t quote graffiti anymore.” This subversive act was soon picked up by many Fashion magazines, Tyrion and Trisha Jones from i-D magazine were some of the earliest supporters of KAWS in the fashion industry. They help introduced KAWS to Colette, a boutique store in Paris, where the artist later did an exhibition for the store opening. KAWS really leveraged different opportunities to get to different cities to showcase his work.

KAWS took a life-changing trip to Japan after his graduation, where he met up with the designer Hiroshi Fujiwara (DJ& owner, fragment design) at Hectic and Hikaru Iwanaga (founder of Bounty Hunter). KAWS quit his daily job soon after his Japan trip in 1998 to peruse art as a career. In 1999, KAWS made his first bucket of gold by

manufacturing his first “Companion”, a Mickey Mouse like figure which immediately reminded viewers of the cartoons made famous by his former workplace. In 2002, KAWS started selling his vinyl toys through his own website. These toys instantly caught the eyes of the global art toy-collecting community, especially in Japan where this genre of toys is well respected and widespread. The website not only created opportunities for the artist to sell directly to end users, but also opened his eyes to a larger audience that he was not aware of in the past. Ditching the middle man was a turning point that taught KAWS he could succeed by embracing the system and disrupting it. In the early 2000s he also reworked many familiar television and cartoon icons such as characters from The Simpsons, Mickey Mouse, the Michelin Man, the Smurfs, and even SpongeBob SquarePants. <sup>4</sup>For KAW’s specific work he employs the X eyes on popular characters that many people grew up with such as peanuts Snoopy, dating back to Mickey Mouse in the 1920s to present times with SpongeBob and Simpson so he really reached a broad spectrum of generations. KAWS has

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<sup>4</sup> YouTube (YouTube, October 20, 2017), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UMH8B-4p5uM&t=348s>

undeniably become a cultural phenomenon but this success has raised questions about the relationship between his commercial outputs and his standing as an artist.

In 2008, KAWS did his first show with Emmanuel Perrotin in Miami which was curated by Pharrell(Producer/ Rapper). The show was a combination of paintings that Pharrell owned and paintings that KAWS made for the show. The artist later designed the cover for Kanye West's album 808s & Heartbreak in the same year that generated a lot of buzz. Through all of his projects, KAWS has successfully blurred the line between fine art and global commerce. He uses his products to allow his imagery to move beyond the fine art world and occupied a more complex global market.

## 1.2 KAWS'S Market performance over the last decade

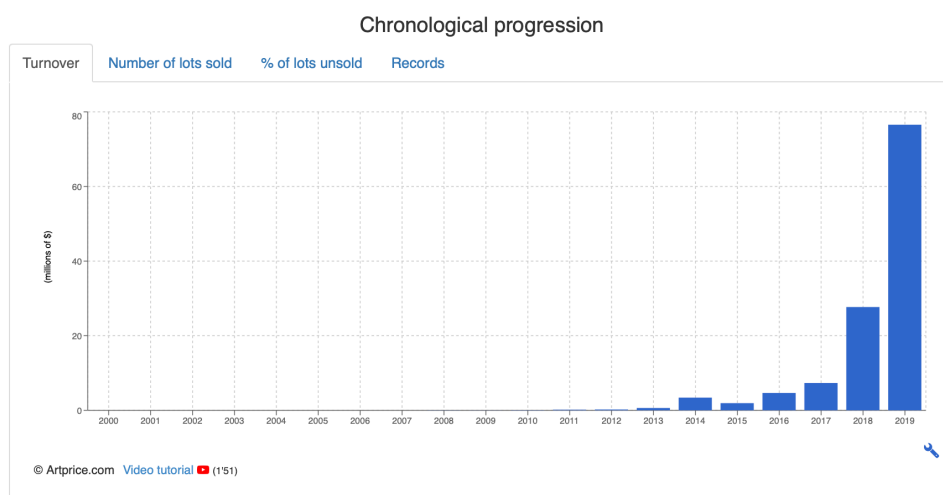


Illustration 1.1 (Artprice.com, KAWS's market turnover)

The following data is available from Artprice.com, the price levels for the artist KAWS are based on 1,978 auction results in the secondary market. According to market data in 2018, artist KAWS ranked 79th in global sales and sold 413 works of art in the second-hand market throughout the year. His market generated a total income of \$27,684,417 in 2018. Its main market is Hong Kong, and the most profitable category is painting. KAW's market soared after 2016, his market turnover value for 2019 (as of Nov. 15<sup>th</sup>) reached a total of 76,557,166 USD, almost three times the revenue he has made in the year of 2018. This huge figure (\$76 million) is 1.7 times his total income (\$44.8 million) in the first decade since he entered the second-hand market in 2008 and ended in 2018.

KAWS's secondary market turnover has been on the rise since 2016, a trend that is particularly evident in the two years from 2018 to 2019. The surge in market turnover has simultaneously reflected the increase in demand for KAWS's art in the secondary market. This phenomenon is not only due to the large number of new collectors entering the market in recent years, but also the result of the support and interaction of collectors around the world.

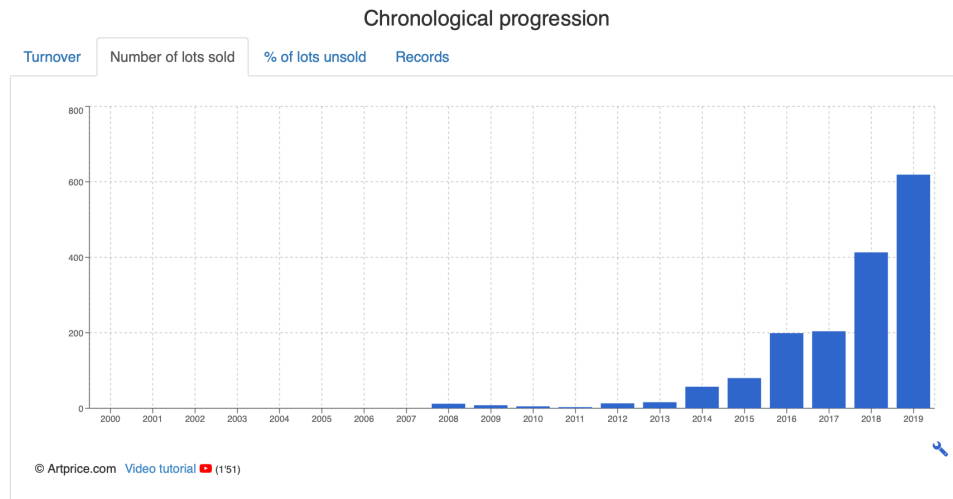


Illustration 1.2 (Artprice.com, Number of lots sold with chronological order)

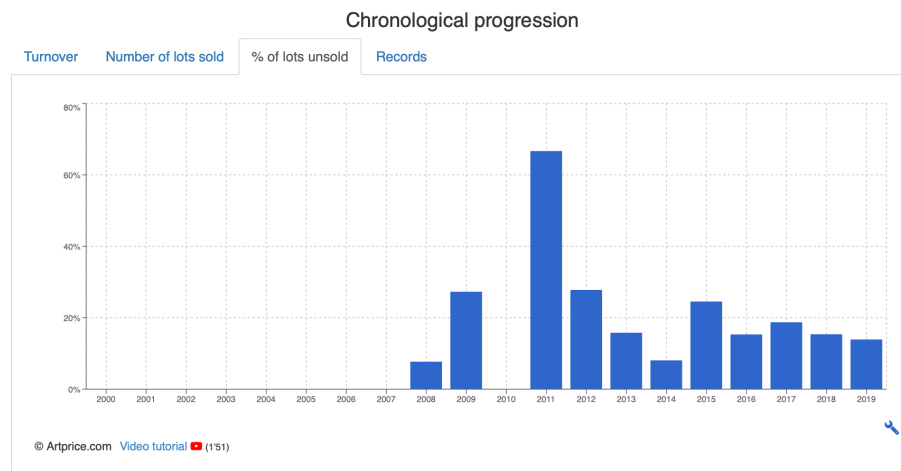


Illustration 1.3 (Artprice.com, % of lots unsold with chronological order)

KAWS's surge in market turnover in recent years has had a certain impact on the amount of art sold in his art market each year, but it has not played a decisive role. The increase in the number of lots sold appears to be more gradual. Therefore, the artist's average price should also show a radical upward trend. Prior to 2015, KAWS traded less than 100 artworks per year on the auction market, and then since the

market demand has soared since 2016, approximately 200 works were sold each year in 2016 and 2017. This demand doubled in 2018. This trend was particularly strong in 2019, with more than 600 works traded in the auction market in the same year. Next we analyze the percentage of the works that the artist KAWS's failed to sell in the auction market throughout his career, or we call them a burn lot in auction terminology.

KAWS's market demand hit a record low in 2011, with a burn rate of with 66.7%.

As market demand in the global market soared after 2015, the burn rate across all categories at auction for the artist KAWS was kept under 15%, which is a very healthy market turnover rate. Maintaining such a low percentage of burn rate for the artist KAWS is particularly difficult, because the average price of his art has soared as a result of the enthusiasm of global collectors for KAWS's artwork over the past five years.

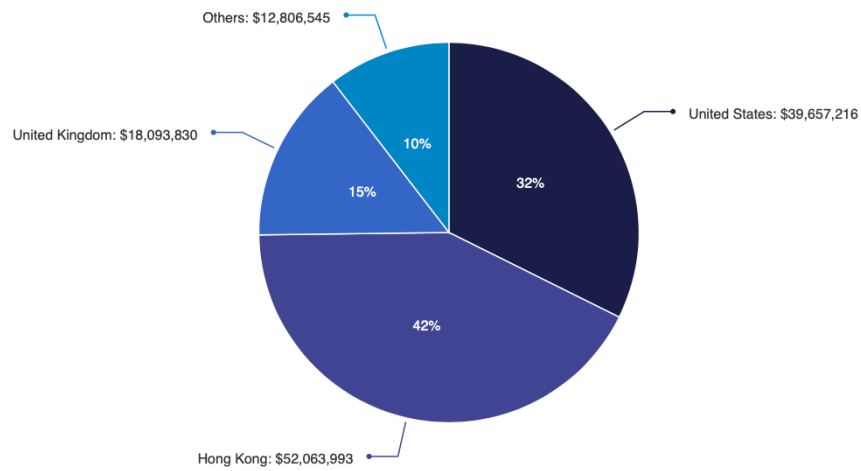


Illustration 1.4 (Artprice.com Market Distribution with market turnover)

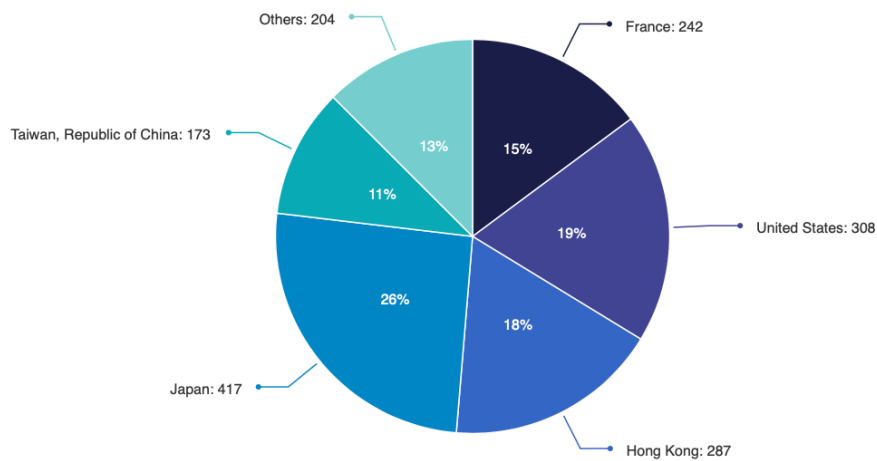


Illustration 1.5 (Artprice.com, Market Distribution with number of lots sold)

KAWS's global market is relatively evenly distributed in different geographical locations in terms of number of lot sold. The Japanese market ranked first with a relatively leading percentage of 26% and a total of 417 lots sold. KAWS's hometown,

the US market ranked second selling a total of 308 lots and Hong Kong ranked third with total of 287 lots sold. Interest in France and Taiwan markets are also quite high with a market share of 15% and 11% respectively. However markets with leading number of lots sold does not necessarily generate the most market turnover for the artist. For example KAWS's all category works sold at Hong Kong for more than \$52 million, making up 42% of the market share by revenue. This significant turnover was only made by 287 transacted lots with a 18% market share. This is because 2 of the record breaking artwork exceeding \$5 million was auctioned at Hong Kong. United States being KAWS's hometown occupied 32% of the total market turnover with \$39 million. And UK, with only 115 number of lots sold, occupied 15% of market share and established an impressive \$18 Million turnover. Therefore, KAWS's most important and lucrative markets remain to be Hongkong, the US and the UK markets.



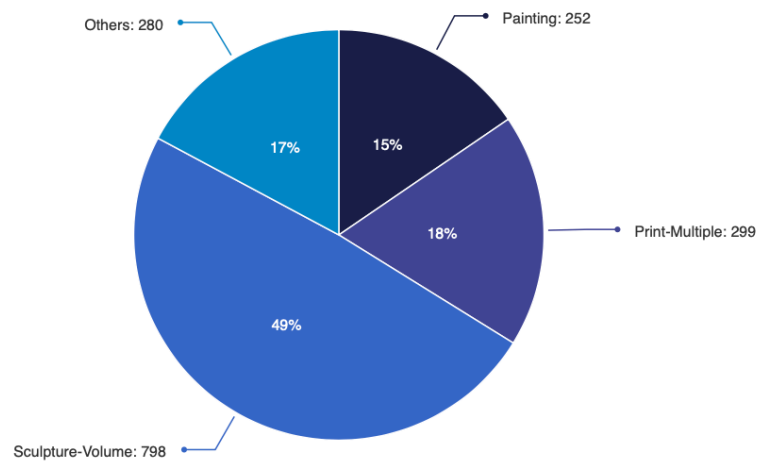


Illustration 1.6 (Artprice.com, Market Category by number of lots sold)

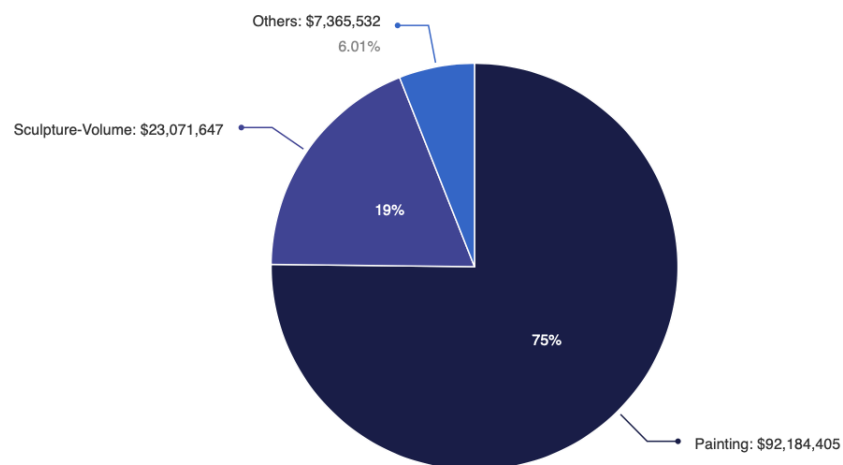


Illustration 1.7 (Artprice.com, Market Category by Turnover)

It is not hard to conclude that KAWS sculpture is the most approachable collectibles and welcomed category on the secondary market, with a total of 798 pieces, highest quantity among all category with an average price around \$28,911 per piece, which made up 19% of his market turnover. Painting is the most scarce, also

where the artist establish his market onto elite status, this category made up 75% of the artists market turnover with only 252 pieces, with an average price of \$365,811 per piece, 12 times the average price of a sculpture.

Year	Ranking
2019	13
2018	79
2017	221
2016	299
2015	677
2014	508
2013	1652
2012	3203
2011	3983
2010	7246
2009	11790
2008	10807

Illustration 1.8 (Artprice.com, Market Ranking)

KAWS's ranking sky rocketed within this decade, he started at 10807 in 2008 and become number 13 in 2019. Another notable finding I would like to brought up is that, up to 2013, KAW's market was still dominated by United States by a significant 79%. Hongkong came in at 2014 at 18% and gradually gaining 1%-2% and earned 22% of market share by the end of 2018. However by the end of year 2019, Hong Kong became the number one market occupying KAWS's market share by 42%, up 20% from the previous year. If you to look at KAWS's top auction record of all time, 9 out of

10 were made in 2019. And 5 out of ten were made in Hong Kong, including “The Kaws Album” (2005) sold for \$12,738,800 hammer price at the Sotheby’s of Hong Kong this April, which made up of nearly 17% of his whole year’s turnover value in 2019.

### **1.3 KAWS’S Commercial Cross-Collaboration**

KAWS is a very successful commercial artist. He has not only appeared in the headlines of art news frequently through record-breaking auction results in recent years, but he also likes further expand his reputation through cross-collaboration with different commercial brands. The appeal of KAWS is that he is willing to create works of different forms and price range to suit the needs of different audiences.

### **TOYS**

The turning point for KAWS’s career in the commercial world came after meeting Hikaru Iwanaga, a toy designer in Tokyo. Together they made hundreds of first editioned “Companion” wooden toys where KAWS would took around and sold on consignment.<sup>5</sup> The companion in 1999 was really important point for the artist, for one of the many reasons it has provided him with economic freedom because they

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<sup>5</sup> YouTube (YouTube, October 20, 2017), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UMH8B-4p5uM&t=348s>

were extremely popular and allowed him to create more and do other things with the money. At the same time it has created a fresh perspective for him on the definition of sculpture and how he might be able to create them. KAWS subsequently produced well over 100 editions of market sought after toys such as “Companion”, “Chum” and “Accomplice” in vinyl, wood, and other media.<sup>6</sup> In 2002, after collaborating with several manufactures, KAWS finally made a decision to cut loose the intermediaries and launch his toys through his own website. The release price is between \$100 to \$500 depending on size and material. The “Companion” toys listed on KAW’s website with a price tag of \$480 each were reported to be sold out by press time.<sup>7</sup> These limited edition toys are listed on secondary market today with sky rocketed prices, some tenfold and some more than that of the original release price.

### **High Fashion- Dior collaboration**

KAWS first partnered with Dior when Kim Jones launched his first collection for Dior Homme back in 2018. The artist created a 10-meters sculpture of his signature BFF character covered in pink roses and phonies which served as the centerpiece of the runway set. He also created two editions of plush toy versions of

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid  
<sup>7</sup> Ibid

the figure-a pink BFF in a black suit and a black BFF in a denim jacket.<sup>8</sup> These plush toys were carried down the Paris Fashion Show Runway by the models and given as gifts for invited guests and celebrities like Victoria Beckham, Naomi Campbell, Kate Moss, Kim Kardashian, A\$AP Rocky, and Bella Hadid whom all took photographs with the BFF plush toys.<sup>9</sup> Kim Jones later released each of the Celebrity X BFF photographs on his Instagram platform and the artist KAWS later reposted.



Illustration 1.9 ( KAWS instagram page, Bella Hadid holding co-branded plush toy)

In 2019, KAWS and Dior released two limited edition versions of these toys to the public, which sold out at the original retail price of \$7,500 and quickly found their way

<sup>8</sup> "KAWS: Dior," KAWS: Dior - For Sale on Artsy, accessed November 30, 2019, <https://www.artsy.net/collection/kaws-dior>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

to the secondary market. The collaboration between KAWS and Dior also includes sweatshirts, keychains, socks, pins, and other wearable items, bridging together the worlds of high fashion and street art. The retail prices for a cotton KAWS X Dior bee pattern T-shirt is \$890, jeans for \$1700, a cotton KAWS bee jacket for \$2050 and bee socks for \$250.<sup>10</sup>

According to Georgia Adams, “What distinguishes art from a handbag, sunglasses or watch is that it also has ‘symbolic value’ above its ‘market value’ and this is what gives it its special status. Art has the ambition of transcending its creator and time; and luxury goods use art as a way of projecting themselves on to that higher, ‘symbolic’ level.”<sup>11</sup> Georgia’s analysis is a perfect interpretation of the continual emergence of luxury brands cross-collaboration with contemporary artists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A similar finding was found in a study conducted by Henrik Uggle and Per Asberg, in relation to brand collaborations: “Brand can reinforce or borrow symbolic benefits through a transfer of design and self-expressive associations from the partner brand.”<sup>12</sup> Some best-known examples include Takashi Murakami X

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Georgia Adams, *Big Bucks: the Explosion of the Art Market in the Twenty-First Century* (Burlington: Lund Humphries, 2014)

<sup>12</sup> Henrik Uggle and Per Asberg, “The benefits and Risks of Strategic Brand Collaboration,” *IUP Journal of Brand management* 7, no.3 (2010):38

LVMH, Damien Hirst X Alexander McQueen, and most recently, Christian Dior with Daniel Arsham.

Brand alliance between High Fashion luxury brands such as Dior and street artist KAWS can bring both parties with mutual benefits, however I will only elaborate on the benefits that KAWS is receiving. First of all, it has affirmed KAWS's commercial achievements by collaborating with one of the most prestigious Fashion houses globally. Secondly, the Dior show is one of the must-see and most anticipated show of the season, the money and thoughts invested for show production and PR is massive, therefore the quality of the collaborated outcome is reassured to the artist. Last but not least, all the celebrities and social elite would come and see the show, the social footprint of all of them combined on social media is beyond imagination.

### **Fast Fashion- Uniqlo Collaboration**

Brand alliance with High Fashion brands can help enhance the artist brand image, but due to the luxury price points, the target audience is limited to the social elite. The fast fashion market, where the real purchasing power is located are not being served.

The artist disapproves people to purchase a KAWS T-shirt for \$200 dollars, instead wanting to create something on a more candid, affordable level. Uniqlo seems to be a great match to the artist's need. Not only producing good quality clothing, but also owns a huge number of offline stores globally.<sup>13</sup> The artist collaborated with the mass market retailer Uniqlo twice last year. The first collaboration was a capsule collection of T-shirts that included a new Companion inspired by the blue puppet Grover along with other Sesame Street characters. The second collaboration included hoodies, sweatshirts, tees, and a range of “plushie” toys. The retail price for this collaboration are \$9.90 for a T-shirt and \$39.90 for plushies.

A desire to speak to a new audiences pushed KAWS to infuse art in non-traditional places. Bucking the conventional wisdom that separated fine and commercial art.

### **Kanye West Album (2008)**

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<sup>13</sup> YouTube (YouTube, October 20, 2017), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UMH8B-t5uAM&t=348s>





Illustration1.10 (Complex.com, Kanye West Album)

808s & Heartbreaks is the fourth studio album by American hip hop producer and vocalist Kanye West. It was released on November 24<sup>th</sup>, 2008 and debuted at number one on the Billboard 200, selling 450,145 copies in its first week. The album has since been cited as a prominent influence on subsequent hip hop, pop, and R&B music, as a new wave of rappers, singers, and producers came to adopt aspects of its style and thematic content. By 2013, it had sold 1.7 million copies in the United States alone.<sup>14</sup>

The artwork for 808s & Heartbreak followed the minimalist style of the album.

The cover art features a deflated heart-shaped balloon. KAWS created the deluxe album cover, which in its original design was a deflated heart photographed by Kristen Yiengest and art directed by Virgil Abloh and Willo Perron.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Cedar Pasori, "The Design Evolution of Kanye West's Album Artwork/808s & Heartbreak" (2008), Complex (Complex, September 11, 2019), <https://www.complex.com/style/2013/06/the-design-evolution-of-kanye-west-s-album-artwork/808s-heartbreak>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

In “Big Bucks: Explosion of the Art Market in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” written by Georgina Adam, In Chapter 3 “Artists: From starving in Garrets to Founding their own museums” the author introduced two major case studies of the intertwining of the world of art, music and celebrity back in 2013. One was a documentary of a six-hour performance by rapper Jay-Z’s ‘Picasso Baby’ in Pace Gallery captured by artist Mark Romanek. All famous people in the art world at that time such as George Condo, Mickalene Thomas, art historian and important art world critics were invited to witness this music and art world mash up. Another collaboration that is worth mentioning that year was between Jeff Koons and the pop singer Lady Gaga. Jeff designed the cover of Lady Gaga’s third album “*Artpop*” in 2013. The album was launched in an extravagant ‘artRave’ event at Brooklyn’s Navy Yard where Koons sculptures were exhibited along.<sup>16</sup>

Due to the high competitiveness of pop music, increasingly outrageous events are the only way to get noticed. And taking pop music into the domain of ‘art’ gives it

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<sup>16</sup> Georgina Adam, *Big Bucks: the Explosion of the Art Market in the Twenty-First Century*(Burlington: Lund Humphries, 2014)

an intellectual add on which takes the work beyond mere entertainment, as well as help the artists to attract a younger demographic.<sup>17</sup>

Reflecting his high profile in the media, KAWS products were becoming desirable collectibles. In 2014, his original Fake companion sold for a hundred and twenty nine thousand USD at auction, one of the highest prices ever achieved for toys. He has a growing family of fans over the world.

During the first hour of the VIP preview at Art Basel Miami Beach in December 2018, the collector's enthusiasm for KAWS reached its peak: in order to win the opportunity to pay \$65,000 for an edition of a new print by the artist KAWS, dozens of people lined up in the aisle of the convention center to write their names on the legal pad.<sup>18</sup>

## **1.4 KAWS'S Social Impact**

In 2012, his companion giant balloon floated in the Macy's Thanksgiving Parade. The American art world community really hasn't got a piece in the Macy's Day Parade

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<sup>17</sup> YouTube (YouTube, October 20, 2017), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UMH8b-lpSuM&list=PL348s>

<sup>18</sup> Eileen Kinsella, "Inside the Craze for KAWS: How a New Jersey Graffiti Artist Achieved Art-Market Domination Without Following Any of the Rules," *artnet News*, March 25, 2019, <https://news.artnet.com/market/inside-the-craze-for-kaaws-1495774>

until the artist KAWS. His work stood out on the public stage, the level of exposure boosted the artist fame particularly in the United States market.<sup>19</sup>

KAWS art works and artistic language have seldom engages with humanity or social political context. Instead, the artist focus has been working with globally renowned brands (Dior, Uniqlo), talents (Kanye West) and regional most anticipated offline events (Macy Day's Parade) to enhance his Global visibility and exposure in different markets. KAWS's works of art have been sought after by collectors inside and outside the art world and have become one of the most outstanding and influential artists in today's global culture .

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<sup>19</sup> YouTube (YouTube, October 20, 2017), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UMHB-lp5uM8h348s>

## **Chapter Two: Ai Weiwei**

### **2.1 Who is Ai Weiwei and why is he important**

Ai Weiwei's work often revolves around Chinese identity. Since he was exiled at a very young age, his work has always focused on the core issues of human rights. Through artistic expression, he successfully demonstrated to the public the conflict between him and the government, as well as the unfair treatment of his compatriots, such as the victims of the Sichuan earthquake. In recent years, he has extended his empathy to a broader human rights level and is committed to exploring the global refugee crisis. By building installation art in galleries in Europe, he reminds people to pay attention to human tragedies that occur in various hotspots. Then produced the documentary "Human Flow", which pushed the issue to more people through the big screen. In Ai Weiwei's work, the artistic value and political value of the work always find a way to co-exist. Throughout the artist's entire career, Ai Weiwei has always been striving for freedom of expression and has always maintained a tenacious attitude. Through different artistic expressions such as sculpture, film, installation and different materials such as ceramics, marble, paint and tea, the artist presents a range of majestic and serious theme: an oppressed experience, commemorating the natural

tragedy, or highlighting his Chinese identity and social history, embracing and protecting human rights on a global level.

Nearly six decades ago, Ai Weiwei was born in 1957. He is the son of Ai Qing , one of the most prominent poets of Communist China. Ai Weiwei grew up during a turbulent period of China's political history. The Cultural Revolution that begun in the mid 60s was the name given to Mao Zedong's attempt to impose his vision of a classless society and to eliminate all those he suspected of undermining his authority. He singled out enemies such as landlords, counter revolutionaries, rightists, foreign agents, capitalist and intellectuals. Millions were forced into manual labor and tens of thousands executed. Because Ai Qing expressed his criticism of the communist regime within the context of the Hundred flowers Campaign. One year after Ai Weiwei was born, his whole family was exiled to the remote Gobi desert in northwestern China as punishment and was banned from writing until 1978. His father was forced to clean public toilets for twenty years, which was considered to be the most humiliating and indecent job at that time. Ai Weiwei's biography, from his earliest childhood to the present day is shaped by the experience of political conflict and state repression.

<sup>20</sup>“When we grew up we had no chance for any form of freedom of expression,” Ai said in an interview in 2006 published in the book *Ai Weiwei Speaks*. Ai Weiwei has understood the meaning of deprivation of human rights from a very early age, so the inspiration behind the large number of art works he later created stemmed from many humanitarianism problems that occurred on a global scale.

After spending his childhood and adolescence in banishment, Ai Weiwei seemed to take up his father’s independent attitude from the very beginning and joined the Stars Group (Xinxin Huahui), one of the earliest avant-garde art collectives to be formed after the death of Mao. Soon thereafter, Ai Weiwei moved to the United States in 1981. He lives in East Village in New York, where he became friends with the poet-cum-activist Allen Ginsberg, documenting the conflict between anti-gentrification protesters and the police. During the Tiananmen demonstrations in 1989, he also held a hunger strike at United Nations Headquarters. New York, his huge melting pot of high and low culture has brought a lot of fresh sensations to Ai Weiwei. By spending time with Chinese emerging artists, authors and musicians, he was exposed to

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<sup>20</sup> YouTube: YouTube, October 16, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YbMsdcAsVU>.

underground culture, avant-garde art and radical activism. After returning to Beijing in 1993 due to his father's ailing health, Ai Weiwei began to explore diverse artistic identities such as designer, architect, photographer and filmmaker. He is also actively involved in other aspects of the artworld by acting as a publisher, curator and art critic. He liaised with artist such as Yang Zhichao (b.1963) and He Yunchang (b.1967) (Berghuis, 2004, p.193; He,2009) and co-curated the exhibition *A non-compromising method/ Fuck off* (2000) with Feng Boyi (b.1960). In 2011 and 2012 Art Review named the Chinese dissident Ai Weiwei the most power artist in the world.<sup>21</sup>

The political and human rights values embedded in Ai Weiwei's work failed to fetch him the highest price at auction. Although the critics appreciated his achievements, these work does not align him with the art historian masters of his period. In China, Ai Weiwei always reflect and critic on the authoritarian regime. In 2011, during a crackdown on objectors, he was arrested at Beijing airport; his passport was removed and he was detained for 81 days. Ai Weiwei's clashes with Chinese authorities have earned him the attention of international new outlets such as

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<sup>21</sup> Mark Stevens, "Is Ai Weiwei China's Most Dangerous Man?," Smithsonian.com (Smithsonian Institution, September 1, 2012), <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/is-ai-weiwei-chinas-most-dangerous-man-17989316/>



The Guardian and The New York Times. As a result, he has become a symbol of the struggles for human rights and an icon of anti-government resistance in China. In the meantime, his forays into Social Media also attracted the interest of scholars and journalists.<sup>22</sup>

Following his release in June 2011, Ai did not gain his freedom but instead being monitored and put under house arrest by the government. It was only until 2015 that he was finally granted back his passport and was permitted to leave China. He settled in Berlin and accepted a guest professorship at the Berlin University of the Arts. Since moving to Berlin, Ai Weiwei extend his empathy to the refugees crisis in Syria and Arab world on the external borders of the European Union. As a contemporary artist and intellectual activist with international reputation, Ai Weiwei subsequently transformed his concern into expressions of art. In 2017, his feature length documentary *Human Flow* was premiered during the Venice Biennale.

Ai is the recipient of the 2015 Ambassador of Conscience Award from Amnesty International and the 2012 Václav Havel Prize for Creative Dissent from the Human

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<sup>22</sup> YouTube (YouTube, October 16, 2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YMt5odcAaVU>

Rights Foundation. Ai's first feature length documentary *Human Flow* premiered at the 74<sup>th</sup> Venice Film Festival in competition. His 2017 installation work, *Law of the Journey*, a 70- meter inflatable life raft filled with human figures representing refugees, was the centerpiece of the Biennale of Sydney on March 2018.

## 2.2 Ai Weiwei's Market Performance over the last Decade

Artprice.com's price levels for this artist are based on 440 auction results.

According to Artprice decision support tools for Ai Weiwei, the artist was ranked at 731 with a total of 48 lots sold, his market generated a total revenue of 1,660,481 USD in 2018. United Kingdom dominated his buyer's Geographic distribution in 2018 with a percentage of 53.5%. His main category is Sculpture-Volume.

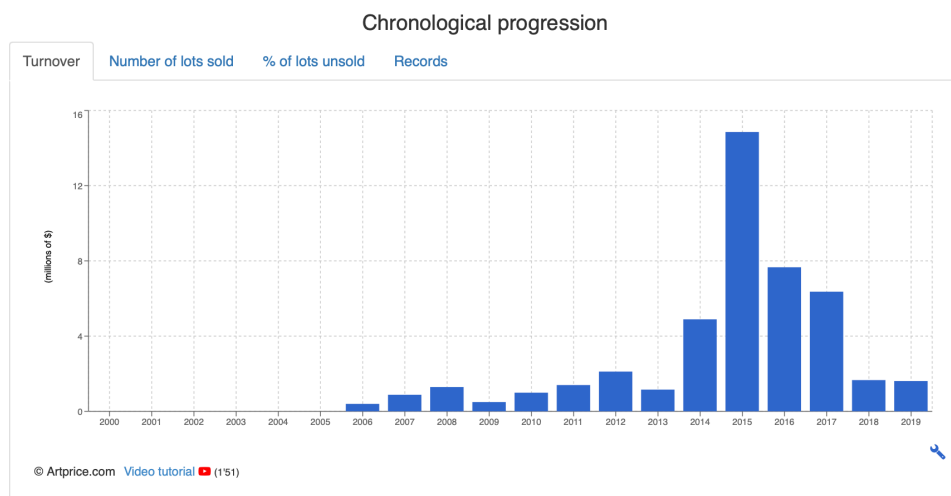


Illustration 2.1(ArtPrice.com, Ai Weiwei's market turnover)

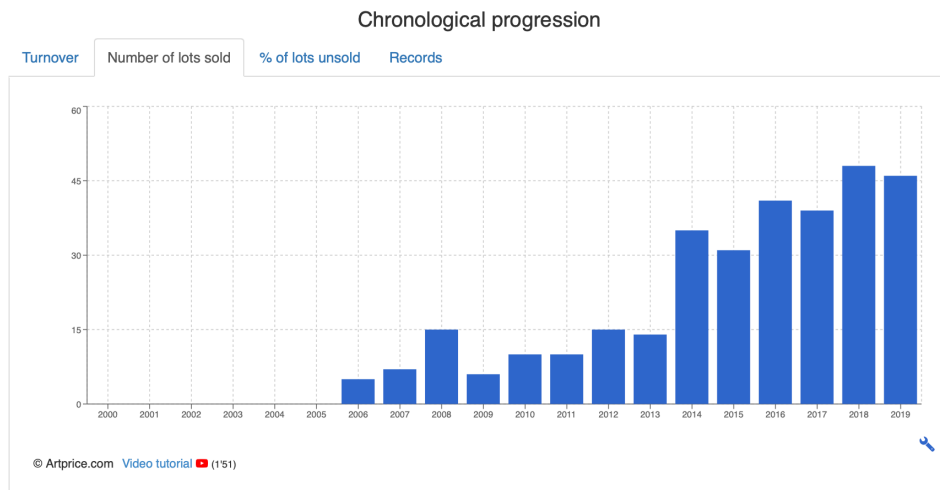


Illustration 2.2(ArtPrice.com, Number of lots sold with chronological order)

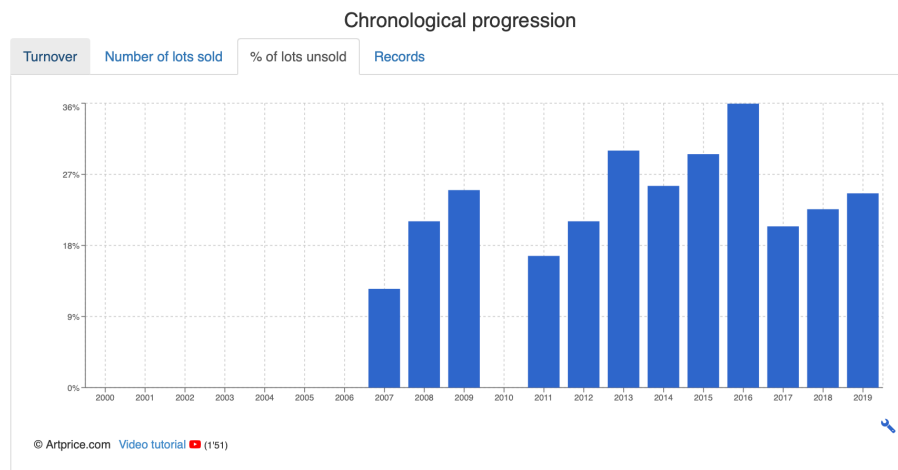


Illustration 2.3 (Artprice.com, % of lots unsold with chronological order)

I would like to analyze Ai Weiwei's market turnover together with data support from number of lots sold and burn rate displayed at a chronological order. Ai Weiwei's work entered the market in 2006 and made a total of \$395,808 with 5 lots sold and 0% burn rate. His market turnover quickly reached 7 digits in 2008 by \$1,290,801 by selling a total of 15 lots, with an average price of \$86,053. The peak of his market was

in the year of 2015, where his market generated a total of \$14.8 Million with 31 lots sold, his average price was \$479,185. He also achieved an auction record at \$4,727,100 during that year. Ai Weiwei's artwork does not turn up at the auction market often due to the complexity also scale of his work. There were 48 artworks transacted on the auction market in 2018, which is the maximum number of lots ever being transacted on the market since 2006. Roughly 31 works by Ai Weiwei would appear on the auction market yearly with a 73% successful transaction rate.

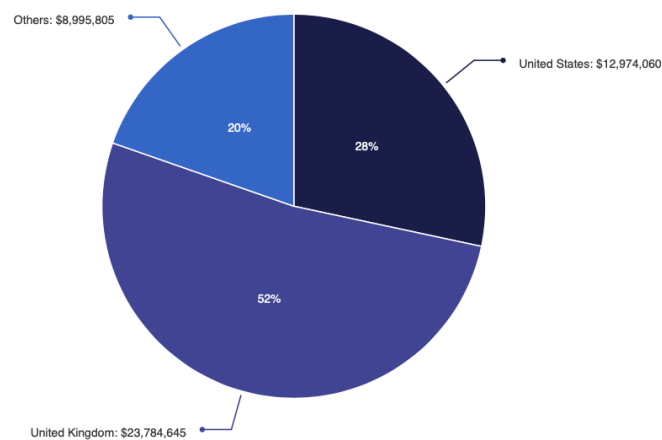


Illustration 2.4 (Artprice.com Market Distribution with market turnover)

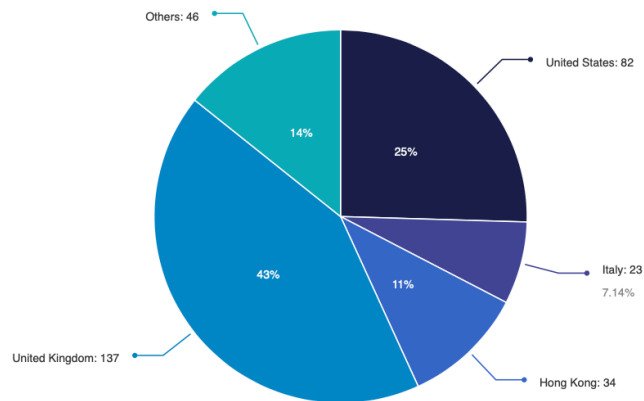


Illustration 2.5 (Artprice.com, Market Distribution with number of lots sold)

In the past 14 years, Ai Weiwei's main collectors or most of his works have been sold in the UK auction market. Market turnover in the UK accounted for 52% of the global market, at \$23,784,645. Ai Weiwei's second most popular market is the United States, which accounts for 28% of global turnover, at \$12,974,060. Aside from the price of art, the UK market ranked first in terms of the number of artworks sold, with 137 auctions topping the list, accounting for 43% of Ai Weiwei's total auction transactions. Ranked second in the US market, a total of 82 pieces of Ai Weiwei's works were sold, and the third-ranked Hong Kong market sold 34 pieces. Ai Weiwei's market, regardless of market turnover or number of lots sold at auctions, the UK and US markets remains to be two most important markets for the artist. This undoubtedly

showed the popularity of this oriental artist in the Western art market. Since the average transaction price of the artist's works in the past 14 years has not produced much fluctuations, and the number of works of art sold each year is relatively fixed, the Ai Weiwei market displayed similar results in the ranking of the two evaluation systems.

The UK and US markets have always been Ai Weiwei's strongest advocates, out of curiosity, in order to better understand his secondary market performance in the Chinese market. I refined the auction information for each of his 14 years. In 2006, Ai Weiwei first sold his sculptures and photographs in the second-hand market. All five of these works were successfully traded, four of which were sold to collectors in the US market, and another to the collector of the French market, which sold a total of \$384,500. In the following year, the United States achieved a turnover of \$692,000 through the purchase of five Ai Weiwei works, and occupied a dominant position in the Ai Weiwei market with a market share of 39%. In the same year, British collectors also showed support and bought two Ai Weiwei sculptures in the second-hand market.

In 2009, Chinese collectors began to appear in Ai Weiwei's second-hand market and became the most important market for Ai Weiwei that year with a total market turnover of \$327,449. A total of four pieces of Ai Weiwei's works were bought by the Chinese collectors, including one piece of watercolor and three pieces of sculpture.

Chinese collectors continued to support Ai Weiwei's second-hand market from 2010 to 2011. In 2013, the Hong Kong market surpassed China's market share in the artist's market. But overall, the UK remains the strongest market for Ai Weiwei's entire career.

Year	Ranking
2019	505
2018	731
2017	248
2016	198
2015	120
2014	376
2013	1038
2012	584
2011	847
2010	939
2009	1217
2008	755
2007	1140
2006	1612

Illustration 2.6 (Artprice.com, Market Ranking)

Since entering the second-hand market, Ai Weiwei's ranking has been relatively turbulent. The artist's ranking in 2006 was 1612, which is very optimistic compared to many new artists appearing on the market. From 2006 to 2008, it has been on the rise, reaching 755 in 2008. However, in 2009, the artist's ranking fell to 1217, returning to the position he just entered the market. This pattern is repeated every three to four years. From 2009 to 2012, the artist's ranking continued to rise, but in 2013 it fell out of 1,000. Ai Weiwei's top ranking is in the year of 2015, however this is not the year he sold the most works in the art market, so it can be seen that Ai Weiwei's total market turnover are not related with the number of art works sold. Ai Weiwei is not a prolific artist because his artwork usually takes an average of two to three years to complete. Ai Weiwei's works of art do not reflect very high commercial value in the second-hand market, because creating higher business value for art has never been the original intention of the artist.

### **2.3 Ai Weiwei's Commercial Cross-Collaboration**

Ai Weiwei is renowned for making strong aesthetic statements that resonate with timely phenomena across today's geopolitical world. From architecture to installations,



social media to documentaries, Ai continues to explore new mediums to reach out to a global audiences to examine society and its values.

As far as I know, Ai Weiwei have not enter the forays of commercial cross-collaboration. His works of art aim to create more social values and allow more people to pay attention to or reflect on the current human crisis. Commercial Cross-Collaboration mainly serves the purpose of enhancing the artist's visibility in other business sectors and to stimulate new consumer markets. This should not be the main creative purpose of Ai Weiwei.

## **2.4 Ai Weiwei's social Impact**

Wenchuan Earthquake- 2008

On May 12, 2008, at 2:28 p.m. local time, the earth trembled with a magnitude of 7.9 on the Richter scale in the Chinese province of Sichuan. It was one of the most devastating earthquakes ever in China. More than eighty-five thousand people lost their lives, including over five thousand schoolchildren.

The earthquake demolished more than 7000 classrooms, killing thousands of students. The heavy death toll attracted discussions among the major reporting medias about the quality of the building. Public opinions were soon being pointed

towards local officials and building contractors. The reporting accused them of corrupting the remaining construction funds by building sub-standard teaching buildings. The scandal quickly became the focus of the reporting. Due to the increasing influence of news reports, the crisis attracted the attention of many international media. The Chinese government immediately issued a notice to force out China's most famous liberal press, Southern Metropolis Daily and foreign media to withdraw from the earthquake zone in order to limit any further investigation on the scandal. (Weaver 2008). When the media's investigation of the scandal was suppressed, some social activists, public intellectuals and activist blogs launched an independent investigation project to further investigate the issue. Among them, Ai Weiwei's citizen survey project is one of the most famous and influential projects.<sup>23</sup>

Ai Weiwei was unsatisfied with the government's refusal to disclose the death toll of the students, and decided to initiate an independent investigation to compile a name list of all dead school children. This initiation on Ai Weiwei's blog soon attracted

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<sup>23</sup> Jian Xu, "Blogging for Truth: Ai Weiwei's Citizen Investigation Project on China's 2008 Sichuan Earthquake," Medium (Civic Media Project, April 8, 2016), <https://medium.com/civic-media-project/blogging-for-truth-ai-weiwei-s-citizen-investigation-project-on-china-s-2008-sichuan-earthquake-68ec10c2b643>

many like-minded volunteers and formed the Citizen Investigation Group(CIG) at his Beijing studio on December 15,2008. CIG first collected the data of the dead students on some related online platforms. In order to collect more accurate figures, CIG began to collect evidence at the earthquake zone. They visited 21 villages and cities, interviewed local parents and student victims, and recorded many valuable photos and videos. After the data was compiled by volunteers, Ai Weiwei posted on his Sina and Sohu blog, China's two major commercial portal sites. on March 15, 2009.

(Hassid,2012) The scandal has once again surfaced in the eyes of the public through the reposting of China's most influential online forum, Tianya Forum (a platform with nearly 92 million registered users). Ai Weiwei's blogs soon became a reliable information hub for those who wanted to know the truth.

Ai Weiwei recruited more volunteers to join this project through a blog advertisement. The masses were very supportive and enthusiastically registered, three batches of volunteers (18,9 and 11 people, respectively) were sent to Sichuan. From March 21 to May 29, Ai Weiwei posted a total of 202 entries releasing names lists of dead student with 115 entries of supporting documentations of volunteers'

investigation. The page view of his blogs reached more than 10 million. At the same time, his blog content has also been reposted by a large number of Chinese forums, public blogs and messaging apps. Making his investigation the hottest topic that attracted the most attention at the time.

Banned by China's mainstream media as a politically sensitive topic, Ai Weiwei reached out to overseas media outlets as an alternative gateway to release his investigation result. By May 8, 2009, he had accepted nearly 70 interviews from overseas media, including prestigious reporting outlets such as NBC, BBC, Reuters and NHK, which put Chinese government under pressure. In an interview about his investigation, Ai Weiwei argued "all citizens should have the rights to supervise the government, as well as the responsibility to investigate the truth when the government keeps silent" (Wu,2009). The main purpose of the project was to "show respect to every individual victim's life and refuse to forget the tragedy" (Wu,2009).

On May 2009, Ai Weiwei's Sina Blog was shut down by the Chinese government forcefully due to the great social influence it has created. In late 2009, Ai Weiwei released two audio visual works 4581 and Hua Lian Ba Er, in dedication to the finding

of the 5194 dead and missing students. 4851 is a long name list of student casualties with background music, displayed in the style similar with end credits of a movie. Hua Lian Ba Er is a documentary of CIG's investigation of the scandal.

A group of what Kellner calls "new critical intellectuals" (Kellner 1998) has emerged in China's new media age, such as Ai Weiwei. They "intervene in the new public spheres produced by broadcasting and computing technologies" and use new technologies to "attach domination and to promote education, democracy and political struggle" (Kellner 1998).

In China, there are very few people like Ai Weiwei, the reason is because it is too dangerous. Ai Weiwei's confrontation with the government for human rights is a very brave and unusual thing, and it is very sensational throughout the world. Ai Weiwei's social influence is huge worldwide. His starting point always revolves around his identity as a global citizen and personal experience, whether it is to showcase a direct conflict with the government or to expose an unfair treatment of the less fortunate. With his keen political insight, he further explores and delves into acute political issues. Relying on continuous exposure and vocalization on its own social media

platform, it has attracted close attention around the world, thereby expanding the event infinitely. Ai Weiwei's celebrity status fails to bring higher commercial value to his works. Instead, through the artist's unique aesthetic, he reproduced his investigation results in an artistic manner. <sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid

## **Chapter Three: Artist's Relationship with their**

### **Instagram**

#### **3.1 Overview of social media platform and the Art World**

According to the 2019 Hiscox online art trade report, Instagram has become the preferred channel to discover, follow, see what is trending and ultimately find art to buy. In 2017, Instagram overtook Facebook and became the social media channel of choice for the art world, and in a very short space of time it has become superior to any other social media platform. The data collected on the 2019 Hiscox online trade report fully demonstrates that the link between Instagram and the art world is the closest among all social media platforms. This thesis will only analyze data collected on each artists' Instagram platform in consideration of limited word count, I feel more comfortable just to focus on one platform and really go in-depth instead of touching base on multiple social media platforms. Therefore the data presented on Instagram could have some relevancy to other social media platforms, but definitely needs more consideration as the findings in the later portion of the thesis does not represent a

universal trend that transfers smoothly to all social media platforms but limit to

Instagram only.

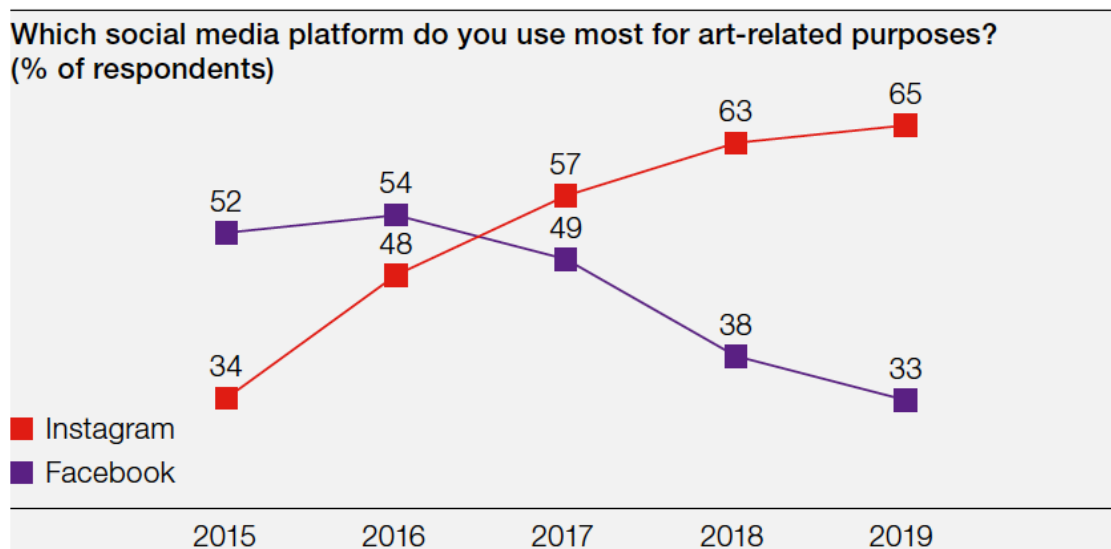


Illustration 3.1( Source: OmnicoreAgency.com, Social media and the art world)

In January 2019, Instagram had more than 1 billion monthly active users and continues to be the favorite social media platform in the art world. 65% of survey respondents prefer using the Instagram platform for art-related purposes. Facebook ranks second, and despite its decline in popularity, only 33% of respondents see Facebook as their preferred social media platform. LinkedIn and Twitter are also used, but with a particular focus of professional networking and news distribution, rather than as a tool to discover and follow artists or art-world developments.



### **3.2 Art world Instagram account performance 2018 to 2019**

Many art world players are all seeing a slowed down in Instagram follower growth.

Average growth in Instagram followers for museum with international reputation such as Tate, MoMA, Guggenheim and the Met was just 27% in 2019 (down from 41% growth in 2018). Among the top auction houses, Christie's, Sotheby's and Phillips saw an average 39% growth in Instagram followers (down from 44% a year ago). Art fairs sees an significant decline in Instagram follower growth, the increase rate for Art Basel, Frieze Art Fair, Armory Show and TEFAF are less than half the growth compared with the year before. This declining trend also affected many blue chip galleries such as Gagosian, Pace Gallery, David Zwirner, White Cube, Hauser & Wirth and Lisson Gallery. <sup>25</sup>

The data shows that among numerous art world accounts active on Instagram, follower growth of museums, galleries and art fairs experienced a significant slowed down over the past year. Is the art world already becoming saturated with Instagram

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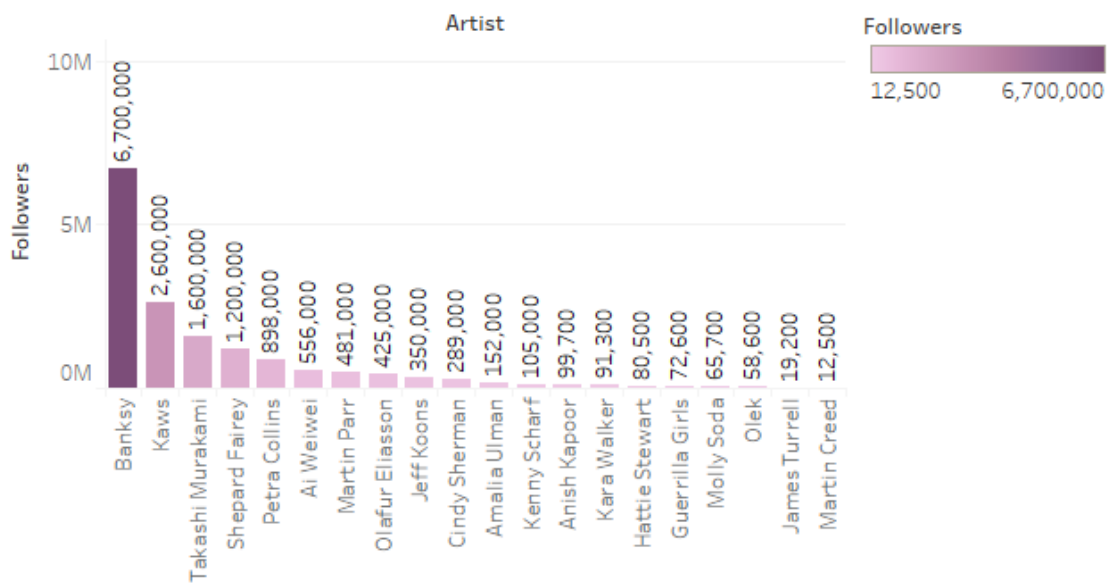
<sup>25</sup> "Hiscox Online Art Trade Report 2019," Hiscox UK, accessed November 30, 2019, <https://www.hiscox.co.uk/online-art-trade-report>)

accounts? Not quite, artists accounts prosper and thrived in the world of Instagram.

Banksy added an incredible 3.5 million followers in the last 12 months, most of these were added when Banksy's work was shredded during a live Sotheby's auction in October 2018. Another artists with recent Instagram success is KAWS, who experienced a 170% follower growth over the past year.

Artist's Instagram account has become the most followed category among all art world Instagram accounts. Artist attract global following by constantly curating different content on their accounts. Some very personal and sensual, some market oriented. The huge amount of daily activity on the platform brings unlimited possibilities to this platform, different artists have flourished on Instagram platforms in different ways. With more power figures emerging, the influence of the art world is gradually shifting from major institutions and public events to individuals. This trend reflected an expanding influence and status of contemporary artists in the art world and beyond.

## Instagram Followers (Million)



(illustration 3.2, Chirstie.com, Chirstie.com, artist's Instagram, follower data extracted on November 18, 2019.)

Christie's website published "Top 100 art world Instagram accounts" in July

2019. Among them, 20 artists were selected by the platform. In order to better

visualization the account follower's data, I integrated followers on each selected

Instagram account onto the same bar graph. The horizontal axis illustrates Instagram

accounts in a diminishing follower base and the vertical axis illustrates total followers

in units of million. Among the 20 most relevant artist Instagram accounts we have

street artists, pop artists, photographers, artist activists, and new media artists, etc. It

can be seen that the Instagram platform have great potential and capability. Because

it has openly embraced contemporary artists worldwide whom carries very different

artistic focuses and purposes, and allowed them to coexist by fulfilling these needs and wants. Artists can create their artistic language through a variety of channels, but social media platforms such as Instagram enables instant communication between the artists and a global demographic within a single click of a button. Because of the huge user base Instagram daily operates, popular artists can accumulate up to millions of fans on their social media platforms, enabling artists to create influence both within and outside the art world.

I will would like to focus on two artists Instagram account in particular: Ai Weiwei and KAWS, two of the most successful and influential contemporary artists of our generation. Both being art world super stars, Ai Weiwei is a cultural figure of international renown, also recognized as the artist with the highest number of exhibition (*Ai Weiwei on Art, Activism and Human Rights*) and China's most famous artist. KAWS is taking the art world by storm – his giant inflatables have graced a lake in Seoul and Taipei, his characters feature on T-shirts, and his paintings sell for seven-figure sums at auction.

Up to Oct.29.2019, Ai Weiwei has 549k followers on Instagram, 100K photos had been posted on the platform with the hashtag “Aiww” (Ai Weiwei’s account name).

Whereas KAWS have 2.59 million followers, a fanbase 5 times larger than Ai Weiwei’s account. More than 1 million photos had been posted on Instagram with the hashtag “KAWS” – more than the number for Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst, Jean Michel Basquiat, or Andy Warhol combined. From the number of fans and the number of reposts, KAWS did receive more attention on the Instagram platform. But how did this attention generated in the cyberspace affected the real world? In the following thesis, I would specifically analyze how the artist utilize key functions of the their Instagram platform such as content display, posting frequency and comment area to further expand their influence outside the art world, thus consolidating benefits in the real world.

It is not possible, within the scope of this thesis, to cover all actions the artists have created on their social media platform and to make connections of each actions with corresponding value which came along with the Celebrity Status. What follows are a selection of posts on artists’ social media platform, which responded to the world

around them and has made a contribution to its growth and provided them opportunities onto different pathways beyond the art world.

### **Instagram function introduction:**

As displayed on the account profile page, we can divide the page into top, middle and bottom sections. In the top section we can collect basic information such as account name and profile picture alongside total number posts released on the account, number of followers and number of followed account. Then in the middle section we see external websites share on the platform. In the lower section we see a brief showcase of recent released content.

In order to better observe account dynamics, I have set a time frame to examine the account for 30 days from September 15<sup>th</sup> to October 15<sup>th</sup>.

### **3.3 KAWS Instagram Account Performance**

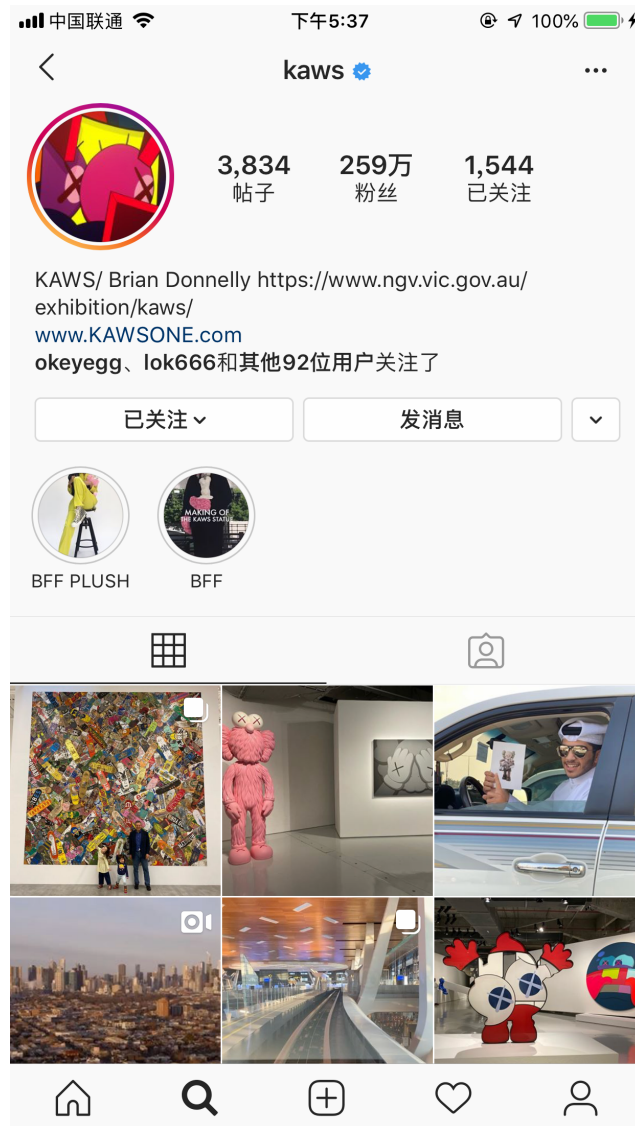


Illustration 3.3 (KAWS's Instagram profile page)

Brain Donnelly's Instagram account name is KAWS, which is a more well-known name for the public, because artist's real name is rarely mentioned or widely publicized in the press. KAWS used one of his own paintings as the profile picture and placed an emphasis on his signature cross eye logo by enlarging it. The use of artwork as a profile picture also shows that he very much recognizes his identity as an

artist and hopes that the public could pay more attention to this identity of him. He have released a total of 3848 posts on Instagram, which is a very common post volume. His account have 2.59 Million followers, which is a very impressive fanbase for an artist. KAWS has tracked a total of 1544 accounts, including many fashion commercial brands that KAWS has worked with, as well as his supporters such as many celebrity collectors, in addition to other artists and galleries, etc. It is not difficult to see that as an artist, KAWS seems to pay close attention to commercial brands and celebrity talents. At the same time, there are two websites on KAWS's profile page. The first is a link to his recent NGV exhibition. After clicking the link, you can see the ticket purchase information. The second is an independent website where he sells KAWS branded products. The artist will occasionally sell his latest limited edition toy collectibles on the website. Both sites are guiding his followers to create commercial value for him in different ways.

### **Frequency of release**

KAWS'S released his first post in February 20, 2012. Up until October 29<sup>th</sup>, 2019, the artist has released a total of 3834 posts, releasing an average of 480 posts



annually. The artist account have released a total of 66 posts during the one month observation period, releasing 2-3 times daily. KAWS posting frequency is carefully scheduled to maintain his relevancy and popularity on the cyberspace.

### **Content display**

Among the 66 posts, more than 40 of them are snapshots of KAWS's artwork, either they are recent painting exhibiting in galleries and museums worldwide or outdoor sculptures situated around the globe. Some highlight content would be International celebrity talents occasionally appearing next to some of the artworks, such as the Victoria and David Beckham, Alicia Keys and the Real Swiss etc. At the same time, KAWS will also share picture of his children playing next to his paintings. However the most popular content are the ones indicating release date of his toy collectables on KAWSONE.com. The picture content KAWS chose to display on his Instagram account are all carefully chosen and sometimes photoshopped by professional retouchers. KAWS focuses on the display and quality of the created content, at the same time also taking great consideration on packaging the "product" by adding in celebrity appearance to better market his brand.

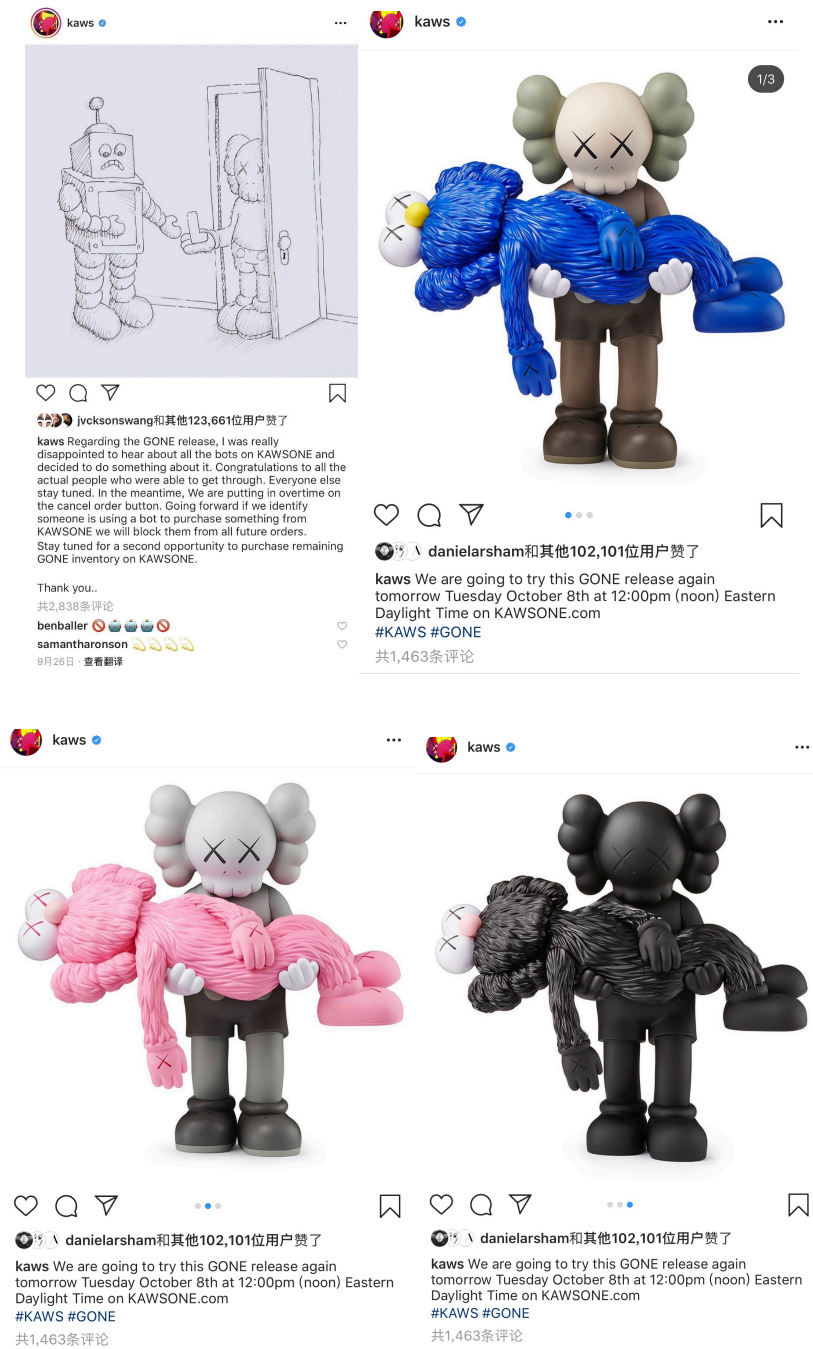


Illustration 3.4 (KAWS's instagram posts)

Among the 66 posts posted by KAWS this month, the number of likes and comments of each post of the artist fluctuated greatly. The number of likes went from the lowest 10,000+ to the highest 100,000+, and the number of comments from The

lowest 40 to the highest 2838. The reason for this large fluctuation depends on the content of KAWS's post. According to preliminary analysis, his record breaking artwork and release information of toy collections are the most popular. Next, I will mainly analyze the picture content, caption and followers feedback of the above two sets of photos with more than 100,000 likes.

On September 24<sup>th</sup>, KAWS released an limited edition of his GONE toy collectibles on Instagram in three colorways. Soon after the release, He posted a drawing of a COMPANION pointing a middle figure towards the robot figure on September 26th. In the caption, he wrote a long note for buyers who bought through internet bots. The main idea of the comment was that he did not approve of buyers using bots to buy his products. He will cancel all orders for goods purchased through this method and release the canceled orders in the near future. Because KAWS has set a purchase restriction policy on his website, each account can only order one product per purchase on his website. Because the value of KAWS toy collections is soaring in the secondary market, many buyers want to make their cut in this very attractive release

and resale price difference by stocking up. 13 days later, after the National holiday in China, KAWS put the remaining stock up on his website.

### **Followers reception**

For KAWS, Instagram is a great platform to gather user feedback, and it act as a testing field for the artist. In the past, KAWS has made collaboration announcements with different brand or released a work-in-progress sneak peek on his Instagram platform. The platform will then generate and provide valuable information such as number of likes , followers comment feedback, number of repost through tracking hashtags etc. Not to mention, one can also track followers gender, age and geographic location by clicking into their page, so the artist could better understand his target audience. All the above information are considered extremely valuable and costly in the business and development process. Instagram is a platform which has the capacity to share and exchange these results for free.

KAWS Instagram platform acts as a publicity channel for his recent fashion cross-collaboration products and his art. He strategically builds up anticipation in the market by utilizing his celebrity effect created on the social media channel. The

more attention and influence he generates on Instagram, the more sales his merchandize will make and the higher auction record he will later break in the secondary market.

### 3.4 Ai Weiwei Instagram Account Performance

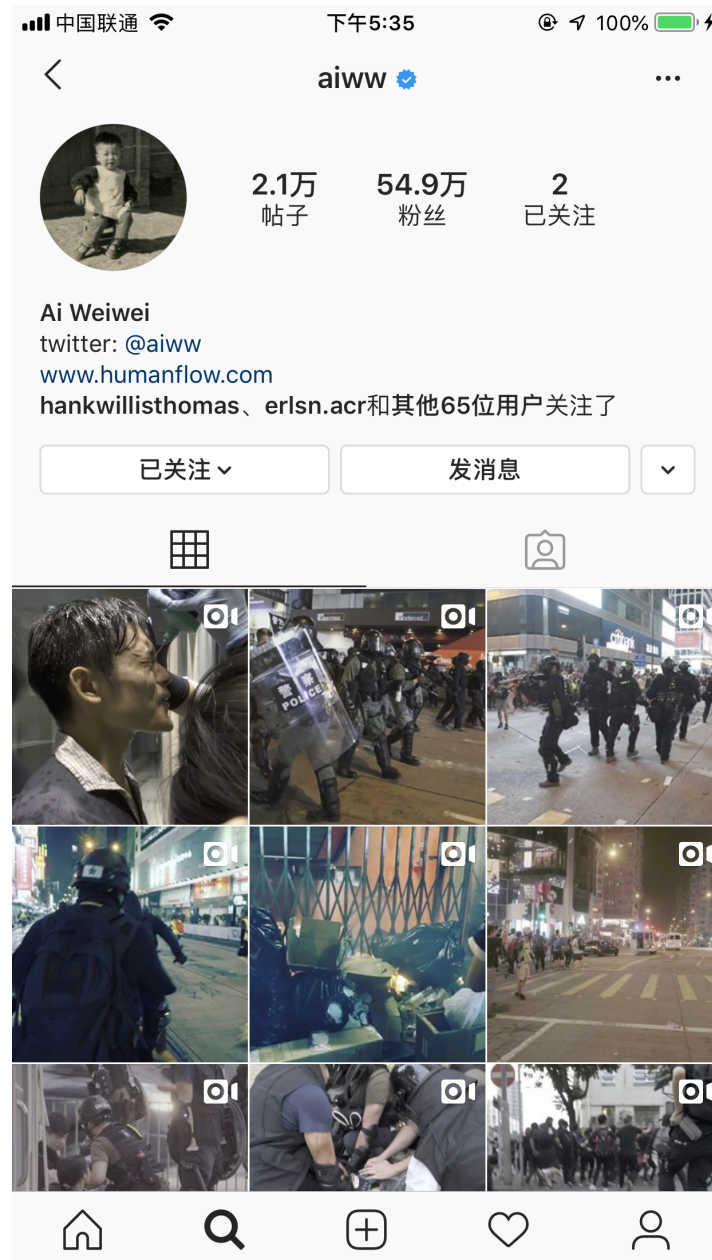


Illustration 3.5 (Ai Weiwei's Instagram profile page)

Ai Weiwei's Instagram account name is aiww, an abbreviation for his real name.

Ai used a baby picture of himself as the profile picture, which is very interesting and provocative decision because he spent his entire childhood in banishment. He have released a total of 210,000 posts on Instagram, very impressive number. his account have 549K followers, of which he only followed accounts: his son and his wife.

Through ai Weiwei's behavior of only following his loved ones, we can infer that the artist is purposefully avoiding commercial side of the art market. He also added his twitter website on the profile page as well as a link to his recent global refugee crisis focused documentary "*Human Flow*". It can be seen that Ai Weiwei has not emphasized his identity as an artist in his social media account, and instead as a caring global citizen. His social media platform comprises a mixture of global political crisis, selfies of Ai Weiwei's everyday acquaintance and snapshots of the artist museum exhibitions worldwide.

**Frequency of release:**

As of December 31, 2013, Ai Weiwei announced that he would no longer post any new tweets on his Twitter platform. Instead, the account will continue to be use for repost purposes. He will use Instagram as his main social media platform in the future.<sup>26</sup>Therefore, in about 6 years, Ai Weiwei posted a total of 21,000 posts. On average, 3,500 posts are released annually, and 10 posts are release daily. In order to better observe account dynamics, I have set a time frame to examine the account for 30 days from September 15<sup>th</sup> to October 15<sup>th</sup>. Ai created 292 posts within the 30 day period, with an average of creating 10 posts per day.

### **Content Display:**

Ai Weiwei has his own unique style of expressing and connecting with his audience, Instagram is his favorite playground, he incorporates his personal life by taking selfies with daily encounters and sharing live videos edits of social crisis and political protests worldwide. The introduction of Fugitive Offenders amendment by the Hong Kong government in February this year, has triggered an ongoing series of demonstrations in Hong Kong. Millions of protesters marched in the streets of Hong

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<sup>26</sup> "Ai Weiwei And The Power Of Social Media," Coshamie, March 7, 2016, <http://coshamie.com/ai-weiwei-and-the-power-of-social-media/>)





This year marks the 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the founding of PRC China, a huge celebratory Military parade was thrown on the 1<sup>st</sup> of October in Beijing, Capital of China.

However, as a person who posts an average of 10 posts a day, Ai Weiwei kept his Instagram page exceptionally silent on the Anniversary day. On Oct 2<sup>nd</sup>, Ai realised a screenshot of Financial Times front page with the headline “ Hongkong violence overshadows China’s anniversary celebrations” and captioned “ 269 arrested yesterday. 187 male 91 female aged 12-71.”

Ai continued to post throughout the national holiday. On Oct 5<sup>th</sup> 2019, Ai Weiwei posted a 30-second video in which several men in black set fire to a storefront on the public street. Ai Weiwei’s caption for the post was “ Some of the protesters attacked Chinese business or Chinese brands.” (See above screenshot reference). More than 146,915 people viewed this video on the Instagram platform. The post also generated 860 comments, some viewers are trying to trace back why this protest happened by pointing to the rich and poor gap in Hongkong. Others expressed their disappointment by labelling the protesters terrorists...

**Followers reception:**

Ai utilize this platform as a virtual gallery, his fans are his audience and the content he posts are carefully selected and edited. It is not hard to notice that majority of his posts does not have caption, and even when the posts do have caption, his emotion and personal view is removed by only quoting from others. Ai uses other people's voice to communicate, whether the voice is from the people who suffer or from the authority. This strategy of removing his own voice from the platform can sometimes make the viewers believe that they owned the interpreting power, and the emotion these posts evoke in their minds are purely subjective. However, Ai is a master on convincing people without him being the convincer. Instagram has undoubtedly become one of his most powerful manifestations. The platform is not limited by time and space, and allow the artist to continuously and repetitively expose visual content to half a million people to promote social change.

**Conclusion:**

Ai Weiwei and KAWS are two very different contemporary artists, both in terms of artistic style and artistic focus. The reason why this thesis chose to write about two

artists who didn't seem to have much to do with each other is that they both showed a common near celebrity status on the Instagram platform. So I am very curious about what two artists with such different styles will display on Instagram. In the first and second chapters, we have examined the level of success with different registers of values including Market Performance, Commercial Cross-Collaboration, and socio-cultural impact.

KAWS is making considerable record breaking prices in the auction market over the past few years. The artist is also very active in the Commercial Cross-Collaboration range, due to most of the collaboration forms being deluxe or limited edition. Second hand market resale prices of these product are average 10 times more the release price. However KAWS did not contribute much in the area of the Social-political value.

Ai Weiwei contributed complete opposite values when compared with the artist KAWS.

Ai Weiwei is quite weak in creating commercial value, his auction result in the auction market is tepid and far from prolific as KAWS. Ai Weiwei was never involved in launching any cross collaboration product with a commercial brands in his entire artistic career. However, in contrast to his inactivity in the secondary market and in the

mass market, Ai Weiwei is extremely active in the field of politics and humanity crisis.

In fact, he is one of the internationally most recognizable artist cum activist of our generation. Both artists are very successful in their respective areas of expertise, through different artistic purposes and means, they consolidated different values both within and outside the art world.

In Chapter 3, we have examined artist's relationship with Instagram. Keeping in mind the different registers of values two artists created with minor overlaps. I found a similar pattern in their Instagram respectively. Ai Weiwei builds and consolidate socio-political influence in the real world by continuously and repeatedly feeding his followers on the Instagram platform with humanity and refugee crisis. Social media act as an powerful vehicle to expose certain "truth" that he thought to be important to the global audience. By attracting more awareness on a certain issue, conversations starts to grow. When more and more people starts to search for the truth, it becomes a socio-political issue, ultimately resulting in a social change. As for KAWS, the main focus on his Instagram page is advertisement and publicity, by putting up first hand notice feeds to his "subscribers", he kept his followers-cum-consumers enticed and

hooked that another cross-collaboration is coming out soon. KAWS's product range is so wide that it covers different needs and wants, also affordability of consumers with different purchasing powers.

Through social media platform such as Instagram, artists such as Ai Weiwei and KAWS achieved massive followings and became very influential both within and outside the art world. Thus a near-celebrity status of the artists are established, making them the richest or most recognizable artists of our time. The platform act as a publicizing tool for them to build up their influence and consolidating the value they aim to create in the real world.

The Instagram platform is a melting pot of culture, a paradise for contemporary artists. Because it not only makes successful artists such as Ai Weiwei and KAWS shine in their respective areas of expertise, this platform can also meet the different needs of other artists. For example, for emerging artists, they can build their own art career on the platform and bypass the role of galleries and dealers. Social media enables artists to maintain a more direct and effective communication with audiences around the world with the click of a button. Artists living in the 21st century are

fortunate to advocate and promote their ideas and messages through social media platforms, which gives them more power and provides artists with more opportunities.

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